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The Rousing of Our Heart

Exodus 36:2-7

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About 3300 years ago, the Hebrew people were wandering in a desert wilderness under the leadership of Moses. After a period of time, they determined that it would be important to have a place of worship, a holy place, a sanctuary, even though they continued their wandering, nomadic lifestyle.

The Exodus passage tells of the design of a tabernacle in the desert. The facility was fairly large, but also fully portable. It had a wooded frame and was bedecked with jewels, precious stones, and hangings of fine linen and other cloth. Over the wooden frame, a tent was draped. Each time the people ceased moving for a few days, they would apparently set up the tabernacle. When they moved on, it was disassembled and packed up for travel. Something like the old circus tent that moved from city to city a few generations ago.

Moses needed gifts to build the tabernacle. So a call went out: "Bring your offerings. Bring money or jewelry or precious stones or wood or fine linens. Bring whatever you can give to the building of the temple." And the people responded. The call went out, and the offerings started coming in.

Then, a most peculiar thing happened! There is no other known story like it anywhere in scripture. The project managers came to Moses with a request: "Tell the people to stop. We already have much more than enough to do what the Lord wants us to do. We are being inundated with offerings. Ask the people to stop bringing them."

So Moses went out among the people and said, "It's enough. Nothing more!" And the story ends with these words: *"So the people were restrained from bringing; for what they had already brought was more than enough to do all the work."*

You know, some day before I die I'd like to preach *that* sermon! Some day, before I finish my journey as a leader in the church, I'd like to hear a knock on the door from our financial secretary or stewardship chair, who would say to me, "Pastor Tom, tell the people to stop. We already have more than enough to do what the Lord wants us to do."

And I would stand, in turn, before the congregation and say: "Enough! There is enough. We don't have a profit. We don't have an excess. But there is enough to do what God is calling us to do." Wouldn't that be a great day?

Unfortunately, most churches aren't there yet. The church in general, and this church is particular, isn't yet sufficiently resourced so as to stay on the cutting edge of what God is calling us to do. So an offering is needed. We seek the kind of bounty that would allow me to stand in this pulpit, your pulpit, God's pulpit, and say, "Enough! It's sufficient. We are now in a position to really do what God calls us to do."

But, let's go back to the Exodus passage. What was the key to the success of Moses' offering for the Tabernacle? How did the people get to the point of "more than enough"? What can we learn from this story?

Well, we see that the trust level in the community of believers was high. Integrity was in place. This is a very important starting place for any offering.

And you'll see there was NO arm-twisting used. There were no gimmicks for keeping the coffers full. Genuine integrity was in place. There was a high trust level.

This must be true for the church as well. The church still has a strong place of confidence in the mainstream of the population, even for those who don't belong. It's really important that such a trust level not be eroded.

I think God has placed this church on a growth track. But hear me when I say that growth is not necessarily a quantity thing so much as it is a quality thing - spiritual formation, faith development, faith-sharing, understanding the Word -- the most important kinds of growth. If you take time to know our story, you'll sense integrity. And I think integrity was present in that desert 3300 years ago, and that's one reason why the resources came in.

Who would have believed a nomadic people wandering in the desert of the thirteenth century BC would have had these kinds of resources to give? They'd left Egypt in a hurry. They'd left so quickly that the bread had no time to rise (thus, the tradition of unleavened bread for the Passover). How much could they carry with them? But they did bring their resources. Their capacity was greater than they knew - and Moses knew it.

Most local churches have the capacity to sustain a vital, healthy ministry. We're not at the end of our rope. But we have told ourselves that we are poor for so long that we tend to believe our own prophecy! The real question is our willingness to release some of what we have for the work of the kingdom.

One of the players on the PGA tour was heard to say, "I'm trying to arrange my life so that I die and my money runs out at about the same time. If I can just die right after lunch next Tuesday, everything should be just fine!"

But we are the church of Jesus! We are not in a weakened position with regard to resources. Our capacity *is* present. We aren't overextended or tapped out. There is enough to do what is asked of us. We simply need a solid offering from our God-given capacity to sustain our ministries. Some of you can give six or seven thousand dollars, or more. Some can give two or three hundred; some, perhaps, twenty or thirty; and some two or three dollars. But the *capacity* is present.

I believe that some of Moses' people thought of resources they hadn't previously considered, and they rejoiced in being able to participate at a level heretofore thought not possible. I believe <u>you</u> might do that also! It's a good feeling to have.

But, you now, the offering in the desert was also of a free-will nature. Nothing less will suffice in the ministry of the Christian church.

One church was having a congregational dinner to raise money for the needs of the coming year. As part of the entertainment, just before asking for financial pledges, a very talented senior high youth was asked to play several pieces on the piano. When he sat down to play, his first piece was Scott Joplin's ragtime number, "The Entertainer," which of course was also the theme music from the movie *The Sting!*

Well, the offering in *our* story at CPC is not a sting. The requested offerings for our 'portable tabernacle' are always free-will offerings.

Some people have season tickets to college or pro football teams. Those who are strongly committed to the arts may have season tickets to the symphony or to the opera. There are theatrical groups in the larger area that offer season tickets. In any of these cases, you undoubtedly receive a letter each year informing you that (regrettably) the price of a season ticket is going up.

Some people might be thinking that the same thing is happening at CPC. The price of a season ticket at your church is going up - or, at least, ticket for the second half of the season.

Not so. We don't sell tickets for seats in worship in our church. We don't have a price on a seat in Sunday school. We don't sell tickets to the twenty plus small groups and covenant groups that meet each week, to the great youth ministry programs, to any of the ministries we are called to pursue. Our ministry is funded by the free-will offerings of the people. It's not a matter of what you owe us - it's never a matter of owing the church money.

Here, at CPC, the offering isn't a matter of how much more you "owe" your church. The church is perhaps the one institution in the world that depends 100% upon the free-will offerings of the people. The church of Jesus Christ operates with a standard that is different from that of the 'world.'

The text in Exodus says that the "hearts of the people were stirred." This is a vital and essential part of the process. It's the way God works. God offers a kind of "rustling" in the heart. A 'rousing' of the heart.

Ben Franklin tells a story in his autobiography about a day he heard George Whitefield preach. Whitefield was trying to raise money for an orphanage. Franklin writes:

> ***During the sermon I soon perceived that he intended to finish with a collection and I silently resolved that he should get nothing from me. I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold. As he proceeded, I began to soften and decided to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and I determined to give the silver. It turned out that he finished so admirably, that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collection dish, gold and all."***

You see? The only way to raise money for God's work in this place is by the free-will offerings of the people when their hearts are roused. That's why I said several weeks ago that your church leaders <u>are not</u> beggars asking for a handout. We <u>are</u> people who have hearts that have been stirred by the call of God, and if you'd like, we'd like you to join us.

Perhaps the key to this whole story is in the line, "There is much more than enough to do what the Lord wants us to do." It's not what we want, but what God gives us to do. Human ambitions can be too high and too grand. It's God's vision that counts.

I believe God has some significant and special visions for the body of Christ right now, for those who bear Christ's name. God expects a great deal from us: in youth and children's ministries, in training and equipping disciples for the 21st century, and for some very important ministries of compassion and mercy. Jesus said that to whom much is given, much is expected. I'm trying to get there, but I'm trying to get there because I want to, and I want to because God has stirred something in my heart.

So we boldly ask for resources, without apology. We openly lay it upon your hearts. We ask for a bounty, even in the desert, over a relatively short time. We ask it in faith, so that this pastor may stand in this pulpit in the near term and say, "Stop! You can stop now. It is enough. We now have enough to do what the Lord wants us to do.

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